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AUTHOR Martin, Carson
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ABSTRACT

The non-academic adult is defined for the English as a second language teacher on the basis of his attitudes toward language. He doesn't care to theorize about language; he just wants enough mastery of it to function in the particular social milieu in which he expects to live and work. The ESL teacher should find out what the student's social and economic expectations are, and aim at equipping the student with the particular language skills he will need to reach them. The teacher should also distinguish between critical and non-critical phonological and syntactical errors. Critical errors should be stamped out as ruthlessly as circumstances permit, while non-critical errors may be handled with less severity. The teacher must also be constantly on guard against developing a type of immunity to unintelligibility by association: he may be unaware that he is automatically interpreting the students' utterances. The author feels that the "live telephone test" described here, in which students asked airline or railroad ticket clerks for information (after having practiced a "probable" dialog in class) is a valid measure of general oral intelligibility. (AMM)

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ESL FOR THE NON-ACADEMIC ADULT

WHO IS THIS NON-ACADEMIC ADULT? IN WHAT WAY OR WAYS DOES HE DIFFER FROM THE ACADEMIC ADULT, CONSIDERED FROM THE LANGUAGE TEACHER'S STANDPOINT? IS HE SOMEONE WHO HAS NOT ATTENDED A UNIVERSITY OR COLLEGE? HARDLY THIS, AS ATTENDANCE AT ONE OF THESE INSTITUTIONS COULD BE THE RESULT OF SHEER LUCK, GOOD OR BAD, ACCORDING TO ONE'S POINT OF VIEW. IS HE SIMPLY AN ILLITERATE? HARDLY THAT EITHER, AS THIS WOULD BE A MUCH TOO RESTRICTIVE DEFINITION. IN TRYING TO DEFINE THE NON-ACADEMIC ADULT, WE FIND OURSELVES IN MUCH THE SAME POSITION AS THE COURTS TRYING TO DEFINE OBSCENITY. THEY KNOW THAT MOST OF US RECOGNIZE OBSCENITY WHEN WE SEE OR HEAR IT AND YET THEY FEEL THEY MUST CONTINUE TRYING (HOWEVER UNSUCCESSFULLY) TO DEFINE IT. IN THE SAME WAY, I FEEL OBLIGED TO ARRIVE AT SOME AGREED-UPON DEFINITION OF THE NON-ACADEMIC ADULT TO GIVE A PROPER FOCUS TO THE REST OF MY REMARKS. IF I DON'T BRING THIS ABSTRACTION DOWN TO EARTH I MIGHT FIND MYSELF IN THE POSITION OF SOMEONE DISCUSSING THE MERITS OF DIFFERENT KINDS OF ANTI-FREEZE WITH A GROUP OF VOLKSWAGEN DRIVERS.

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FIRST OF ALL, I AM GOING TO DEFINE THE NON-ACADEMIC ADULT, FOR PRESENT PURPOSES, IN TERMS OF HIS ATTITUDE TOWARD LANGUAGE. THE NON-ACADEMIC ADULT IS USUALLY NOT INTERESTED IN AN ANALYTIC APPROACH TO LANGUAGE. IT IS TO HIM JUST A MEANS TO AN END, SOCIAL OR ECONOMIC AND THESE ENDS MAY, IN FACT, REQUIRE VERY LITTLE REAL MASTERY OF LANGUAGE.

HE DOESN'T CARE TO THEORIZE ABOUT LANGUAGE. HE JUST WANTS ENOUGH MASTERY OF IT TO FUNCTION IN THE PARTICULAR SOCIAL MILIEU IN WHICH HE EXPECTS TO LIVE AND WORK. FOR WANT OF A BETTER EXPRESSION, WE CALL THIS HIS "POINT OF NEED."

WE COULD ADD ANOTHER DIMENSION TO OUR DEFINITION BY CONSIDERING THE NON-ACADEMIC'S GENERAL SOCIAL ATTITUDE AS IT MIGHT AFFECT THE LANGUAGE TEACHER'S PLANS. IN GENERAL, HE WANTS TO TALK LIKE THE PEOPLE AROUND HIM, NOT BETTER THAN THEY. HE IS FREE OF SOME OF THE INHIBITIONS OF THE ACADEMIC ADULT. HE DOES NOT SUFFER THE SAME HORRIBLE SHAME FROM THE THOUGHT THAT HE MIGHT HAVE PERPETUATED A FEW FORMAL GRAMMATICAL ERRORS. HE DOES NOT FEEL THAT HIS SOCIAL FUTURE RESTS ON SUCH FLIMSY SUPPORTS. HE IS INTERESTED IN LANGUAGE AS COMMUNICATION AND WILL ATTEMPT TO COMMUNICATE REGARDLESS OF THE ERRORS HE MAKES. HE IS ONLY INTERESTED IN THE GRAMMAR OF USAGE, NOT IN ANY THEORETICAL GRAMMAR.

NOW JUST HOW DOES ONE GO ABOUT TEACHING THIS NON-ACADEMIC ADULT, AS I HAVE JUST DESCRIBED HIM?

SINCE I HAVE SAID THAT HE LOOKS UPON LANGUAGE MOSTLY AS A MEANS TO AN END, THE TEACHER WOULD BE WISE TO FIND OUT WHAT THAT END IS AND AIM AT EQUIPPING HIS STUDENT WITH THE PARTICULAR LANGUAGE SKILLS HE WILL NEED TO REACH IT. THE STUDENT WILL ACTUALLY DECIDE ON THE LINGUISTIC GOAL BUT THE TEACHER, WITH HIS EXPERTISE WILL DECIDE ON THE MOST EFFICIENT WAY OF REACHING IT. THIS IS SIMPLE REALISM.

BY TRYING TO TEACH A NON-ACADEMIC STUDENT TOO MUCH, A TEACHER CAN EASILY DISCOURAGE HIM AND END UP TEACHING HIM NOTHING. TEACHERS TEACHING THE NON-ACADEMIC ADULT SOON FIND OUT THAT YOU MAKE YOUR TEACHING RELEVANT OR PERISH, THAT IS, LOSE YOUR STUDENTS. OF COURSE, RELEVANCY IN A NON-ACADEMIC CONTEXT IS MORE EASILY IDENTIFIABLE THAN IN SOME ACADEMIC CONTEXTS.

LET US TAKE THE QUESTION OF PRONUNCIATION, FOR EXAMPLE. HOW PERFECT SHOULD WE EXPECT THE PRONUNCIATION OF THE NON-NATIVE SPEAKER TO BE? WE KNOW THAT, WITH THE KNOWLEDGE OF PHONETICS NOW AVAILABLE, IT SHOULD BE POSSIBLE WITH ENOUGH PRACTICE TO TEACH STUDENTS TO SPEAK FOREIGN LANGUAGES WITH ALMOST NO ACCENT. IN PRACTICE, OF COURSE, THIS RARELY HAPPENS. NATIVE LANGUAGE INTERFERENCE, LACK OF TIME AND LACK OF INTEREST ARE THE MAIN FACTORS PREVENTING IT. BUT SHOULD TEACHERS EVEN AIM AT DEVELOPING PERFECT PRONUNCIATION IN THEIR STUDENTS? CERTAINLY THERE ARE OCCASIONS WHEN HE SHOULD, BUT IN GENERAL IT IS AN UNREALISTIC AIM AND SHOULD BE REPLACED BY THE AIM OF INTELLIGIBILITY.

BUT THEN YOU MIGHT ASK, "HOW DOES ONE DEFINE OR TEST INTELLIGIBILITY?" CERTAINLY THIS IS NOT EASY AND I CAN ONLY DESCRIBE HOW WE ATTEMPT TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM IN THE PROGRAMS FOR WHICH I AM RESPONSIBLE.

FIRST OF ALL, WE MUST REMEMBER THAT INTELLIGIBILITY IS NOT THE SAME THING FOR PEOPLE ACCUSTOMED TO HEARING FOREIGN ACCENTS AS FOR THOSE NOT ACCUSTOMED TO HEARING THEM. I REMEMBER AN ACTUAL CASE OF A TEACHER TELLING ME ABOUT THE WONDERFUL CLASS HE HAD. "THEY'RE ABSOLUTELY MARVELLOUS," HE SAID. "THEY HAVE LOST EVERY TRACE OF ACCENT." I WAS MORE THAN AMAZED. I SIMPLY DIDN'T BELIEVE HIM. BUT I WAS CURIOUS ENOUGH TO GO AND SEE THIS UNUSUAL CLASS ONE TIME AND THE EXPLANATION BECAME IMMEDIATELY CLEAR. THE TEACHER WAS TALKING WITH THEIR ACCENT.

THIS IS THE EXTREME CASE, I ADMIT, BUT IT IS A VERY COMMON THING NEVERTHELESS FOR TEACHERS TO BECOME SO ACCUSTOMED TO THE SCRAMBLED SYNTAX AND ALIEN INTONATIONS OF THEIR STUDENTS THAT THEY ARE UNAWARE OF THE INTERPRETING JOB THEY ARE PERFORMING AUTOMATICALLY EVERY TIME THEY CONVERSE. VERY OFTEN VISITORS TO THEIR CLASSES FIND SOME STUDENTS QUITE DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND.

THIS MEANS, OF COURSE, THAT TEACHERS MUST CONSTANTLY BE ON THEIR GUARD AGAINST DEVELOPING A TYPE OF IMMUNITY TO UN-INTELLIGIBILITY BY ASSOCIATION. THE DEFENCE AGAINST THIS EROSION OF ONE'S LINGUISTIC SENSIBILITIES IS TO BE QUITE CLEAR AS TO WHICH ARE THE CRITICAL PRONUNCIATION ERRORS AND WHICH ARE THE NON-CRITICAL ONES. THE CRITICAL ONES SHOULD BE STAMPED OUT AS RUTHLESSLY AS CIRCUMSTANCES PERMIT WHILE THE NON-CRITICAL ONES MAY BE HANDLED WITH MUCH LESS SEVERITY.

ON THE SYNTACTICAL LEVEL THIS SAME DISTINCTION BETWEEN CRITICAL ERRORS AND NON-CRITICAL ERRORS COULD BE MAINTAINED. ERRORS WHICH DEFINITELY INTERFERE WITH THE COMMUNICATION OF A MESSAGE ARE CRITICAL AND THOSE WHICH ONLY HAVE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS ARE NON-CRITICAL IN THIS CONTEXT. NO TEACHER, OF COURSE, IS GOING TO DELIBERATELY TEACH "I LIKE VERY MUCH ENGLISH," INSTEAD OF "I LIKE ENGLISH VERY MUCH." BUT IN TEACHING THE NON-ACADEMIC ADULT, HE SHOULD BE AWARE OF THE FACT THAT THE TIME NECESSARY TO CORRECT SOME OF THESE LESS CRITICAL ERRORS IS IN SOME CIRCUMSTANCES WASTED AND MIGHT BETTER BE SPENT ON SOMETHING MORE CRITICAL, SUCH AS HOW TO READ THE SIGN--DON'T TOUCH--10,000 VOLTS.

IT MIGHT SEEM, UP TILL NOW, THAT I AM ADVOCATING SOMETHING WHICH MIGHT LEAD TO COMPLETE ANARCHY IN THE CLASSROOM. THIS WOULD PROBABLY BE TRUE IF WE SPOKE THIS WAY TO BEGINNING TEACHERS, BUT WE DON'T DO IT IN OUR INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAM. IN THE BEGINNING WE PREACH A RATHER PURE GOSPEL OF THE VALUE OF PATTERN PRACTICE, ACTION CHAIN DRILL, SITUATIONAL PRESENTATION OF MATERIAL, EXPERIENTIAL AND AUDIO-VISUAL APPROACHES, WHERE PRACTICABLE, AND ALL THE OTHER 'REVEALED SCRIPTURE' OF TWENTIETH CENTURY LANGUAGE TEACHING. THEN, WHEN THEY HAVE HAD SOME EXPERIENCE IN CONTROLLED SITUATIONS, AND PERHAPS HAVE BEGUN TO ENTERTAIN CERTAIN SUSPICIONS AS TO THE MAGIC INFALLIBILITY OF THE GOSPEL THEY HAVE BEEN TAUGHT, WE COME RIGHT OUT AND TELL THEM THE HORRID TRUTH--THERE JUST ISN'T ANY MAGIC FORMULA WHICH FITS

ALL SITUATIONS--THERE ARE ONLY MAGICALLY FLEXIBLE TEACHERS WHO CAN ASSESS ANY SITUATION AND DRAW ON THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF ALL THE AVAILABLE TEACHING DEVICES TO MEET THESE SITUATIONS AT THE STRATEGIC MOMENT. WE ENCOURAGE TEACHERS TO DEVELOP THIS SORT OF FLEXIBILITY AND WHERE THEIR NEED FOR THE ORDERLINESS OF THE ASSEMBLY LINE APPROACH IS TOO OBVIOUS WE DISCOURAGE THEIR ENTERING THIS PARTICULAR FIELD OF ACTIVITY ALTOGETHER.

THIS SORT OF 'CONTROLLED FLEXIBILITY' AS I WOULD CALL IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT IN DEALING WITH THE NON-ACADEMIC ADULT. IT IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT HERE BECAUSE OF THE WIDE VARIATION IN NEEDS AND ATTITUDES. THE COMMUNICATION NEEDS VARY FROM THAT OF THE SKILLED TRADESMAN IN SOME OF OUR SPECIAL CLASSES WHO WANTS TO PASS A TRADES EXAMINATION TO THAT OF THE MOTHERS OF PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN WHO ATTEND SPECIAL CLASSES WHERE THEY MIGHT EVEN LEARN THE NURSERY RHYMES TAUGHT TO THEIR CHILDREN BY VOLUNTEER TEACHERS. OF COURSE, TEACHERS DO SPECIALIZE IN DIFFERENT PARTS OF THIS BROAD FIELD, BUT THE IDEAL TEACHER--AND THERE ARE SOME--CAN HANDLE ANY SITUATION.

I AM GOING TO CLOSE BY TELLING YOU OF AN EXPERIMENT WHICH IS STILL IN PROGRESS AND HAS ALREADY PROVIDED US, WE THINK, WITH A PRETTY GOOD CRITERION OF INTELLIGIBILITY. IT DOES NOT, OF COURSE, COVER ALL SITUATIONS BUT IT IS THE MOST GENERALLY VALID TEST WE HAVE SO FAR FOUND OF ORAL COMMUNICATION ABILITY.

IN SEVERAL OF OUR CLASSROOMS WE HAVE HAD MOVABLE TELEPHONES INSTALLED. THESE ARE NORMAL TELEPHONES EXCEPT THAT THEY ARE ADJUSTED SO THAT ALL CONVERSATIONS CAN BE RECORDED FOR LATER USE. THE TEACHER PREPARES A PROBABLE CONVERSATION WITH A TICKET CLERK AT ONE OF THE AIR LINES OR ONE OF THE RAILROADS. AFTER REHEARSING THIS DIALOGUE, ONE OF THE STUDENTS IS ASKED TO CALL THE RAILWAY OFFICE AND GET CERTAIN INFORMATION. THE RAILWAY CLERK, NOT KNOWING THAT THE CALL IS COMING FROM A CLASSROOM BECOMES AN UNWITTING EXAMINER AND SOME VERY INTERESTING RESULTS HAVE ALREADY BEEN NOTED.

THE FIRST THING NOTICED WAS THE NUMBER OF UNPREDICTABLE VARIATIONS IN THE RESPONSES OF THE DIFFERENT PEOPLE CALLED. SINCE THE CONVERSATIONS WERE TAPED THESE VARIATIONS COULD BE PRACTISED SO THAT THE NEXT STUDENT MAKING A CALL WOULD BE BETTER ARMED.

THE NEXT THING NOTICED WAS THE FACT THAT WHAT WAS QUITE INTELLIGIBLE TO THE TEACHER IN THE CLASSROOM, SUDDENLY BECAME UNINTELLIGIBLE TO THE CLERK IN THE RAILROAD OFFICE. THERE COULD BE SEVERAL REASONS FOR THIS PARTICULAR PHENOMENON APART FROM THE NORMAL ACOUSTICAL ONES WHICH TROUBLE EVEN NATIVE SPEAKERS IN TELEPHONE COMMUNICATION. IN THIS CASE, THE STUDENTS HAD EITHER NOT HAD ENOUGH PRACTICE TO MAKE THE CHANGE FROM MANIPULATION TO COMMUNICATION OR AS MENTIONED EARLIER, THE TEACHER, BECAUSE OF THE CORRUPTION OF THE ~~TEACHER~~'S EAR BY ASSOCIATION, HAD OVERLOOKED CERTAIN CRITICAL POINTS IN THE PRACTICE PERIOD.

IT TURNED OUT THAT ONE OF THE MORE CRITICAL POINTS OF PRONUNCIATION IN THESE CONVERSATIONS WAS THAT OF THE STRESS AND INTONATION PATTERNS OF ENGLISH SENTENCES, PHRASES AND WORDS.

ALTHOUGH WE STILL NEED EXPERIENCE, WE FEEL THAT THIS LIVE TELEPHONE TEST IS THE MOST VALID MEASURE WE HAVE FOUND OF GENERAL ORAL INTELLIGIBILITY. WE FEEL THAT ANY STUDENT WHO CAN MAKE HIMSELF INTELLIGIBLE AND WHO CAN UNDERSTAND SOMEONE ELSE IN AN UNREHEARSED TELEPHONE CONVERSATION WILL HAVE LITTLE DIFFICULTY CONDUCTING A FACE TO FACE CONVERSATION WHERE ALL THE EXTRA-LINGUISTIC FACTORS ARE PRESENT TO REINFORCE THE ACTUAL LANGUAGE USED.

TO SUM UP BRIEFLY WHAT I HAVE TRIED TO SAY, I REPEAT THAT THE AIM OF THE NON-ACADEMIC ADULT IN LANGUAGE LEARNING SHOULD BE TO BECOME INTELLIGIBLE IN A PARTICULAR MILIEU AS A BEGINNING AT LEAST, AND THE JOB OF THE TEACHER IS TO UNDERSTAND ALL THE LANGUAGE-TEACHING DEVICES AVAILABLE SO THAT HE CAN APPLY THEM IN THE MOST EFFICIENT WAY POSSIBLE IN ALL SITUATIONS.

To abuse an old cliché

~~LET US TURN AN OLD CLICHE TO OUR PURPOSE AND SAY:~~

ALL'S FAIR IN LOVE AND WAR AND ALMOST SO IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE TO THE NON-ACADEMIC ADULT.

Parsons Kaplan